DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 455 UD 033 243

AUTHOR	Duke, Debi, Ed.
TITLE	Real Learning: Do Tests Help?
INSTITUTION	National Coalition of Education Activists, Rosendale, NY.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	14p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Coalition of Education Activists, P.O. Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572 ($1 single copy; free to members).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Action for Better Schools; v6 n2 Win-Spr 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Achievement Tests; Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning; *Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation; Test Coaching; *Test Use

ABSTRACT

This theme issue reviews the advantages and disadvantages of testing. Both activists and researchers seem to agree that tests measure a limited range of skills and that test preparation alone does not improve teaching or learning. There is also substantial agreement among researchers and activists opposed to widespread test use that no single measure, including test scores, provides a reliable or fair basis for making decisions about children's education. Some of the problems posed by standardized testing are reviewed, and some suggestions are offered for parents and activists who are concerned about the use of tests in local schools. Questions should be asked to determine: (1) the tests being used; (2) other methods used to evaluate students and schools; (3) whether tests are explained adequately; (4) the school's plans for helping students with low test scores; (5) whether tests allow students to demonstrate skills directly; and (6) whether teachers have the resources and preparation to help students develop the skills to be tested. Mobilizing parents, community activists, teachers, and teacher organizations to work for better student assessment is discussed. Some teacher and parent opinions about test use are offered. A second article, "Meanwhile, When Do I Sleep?" by Bill Bigelow, discusses teacher reactions to Oregon's new high-stakes standards and assessments. Some general resources about assessment are listed. (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 437 455

Real Learning: Do Tests Help?
Action for Better Schools
Newsletter of the National Coalition of Education Activists

UD033243

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Debi Duke
Nat. Coalition of Ed. Act.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Action
FOR BETTER SCHOOLS

Newsletter of the National Coalition of Education Activists

VOL. 6/NO. 2
WINTER/SPRING 1999

Real Learning: Do Tests Help?

Students need to learn skills and information that are useful in the real world. Parents and guardians need information on student achievement and school performance. Teachers need tools that allow them to help students learn, evaluate that learning, and explain to students, families, and the community what is and isn't being learned and why.

PHOTO: ©EARL DOTTER

Depending on who you talk to, the testing mania currently sweeping the U.S., and edging into Canada and Mexico, is either the answer to all of those needs or a barrier to meeting any of them. As we worked to prepare this issue of *Action*, we found "experts," as well as members and friends of NCEA, holding those two views and everything in between.

That doesn't mean, however, that there's no common ground.

Both activists and researchers seem to agree that tests measure a limited range of skills and that test preparation alone does not improve teaching or learning.

There was also substantial agreement that no single measure — including test scores — provides a reliable or fair basis for making decisions about children's education. As a result, virtually everyone we spoke with and everything we read opposed the use of tests for "high-stakes" purposes. Test scores should not dictate decisions about student placement in groups, classes, tracks, programs, or schools, said activists and experts alike.

Many NCEA-ers are also convinced that alternative or performance assessments (see page 2) tell teachers, families, and community members more about what will help students excel and about what makes a good school. These activists are concerned that over-reliance on tests tends to discourage the development of other ways to measure student achievement and school performance.

Education activists and researchers, including those within NCEA, do not agree on how much of an improvement standards-based tests truly are. A recent issue of the newsletter of Nyack (NY) Partners in Education (PIE) put it this way, "The trouble with even an improved statewide test is that it's still standardized. By definition, it will measure test taking rather than curiosity and knowledge. When...students get better at taking and our teachers at teaching to this new test, will the quality of education be any higher?"

On the other hand, Philadelphia teacher Ron Whitehorne argues, "While many current uses of test data are objectionable, it is worth remembering that for many years Philadelphia rejected nationally-normed tests in favor of its own test which masked the extent to which our children were not learning....a test like the SAT-9 is an important diagnostic tool, informing teachers of...student weakness."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2 ▶

UD033243

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Johnsie Valdez

parent activist, Nyack, NY

"If you're testing to get students into better classes, it could help [improve the schools]. If the tests keep kids where they are, then it's like tracking. I want to see how tests help students get a job or go to college. You can do all the testing you want, but test kids to help them, not to hold them back."

Jenice View

parent activist, Washington, D.C.

"I tell my kids that tests are superficial measures of knowledge and that they are screening devices for determining who "gets in" and "who gets out" of schools, special programs, etc. I also tell them that as African American girls, it is important for them to understand and know the rules, screening devices, and hoops, even if we don't believe in or trust them.

I pulled my kids out of public school this year to home-school them following the seriously high pressure last year on all D.C. public schools to "teach to the test." All the "extras" — art, music, dance, and, it seemed, social studies, science, and foreign languages — were scrapped or minimized in favor of English and math test skills. The tension was felt keenly by even the best students and the most competent teachers."

Mary O'Brien

parent activist, Upper Arlington, OH

"We need to help kids in immediate danger of negative consequences from high-stakes tests, but we also need to educate parents and students alike to the flaws of these assessments and about more appropriate individualized teaching and assessments."

WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY...

■ **Assessment.** Ways to get — and use — information about how to improve and support student learning. Assessment methods should be fair to all students. Parents, community activists, and students, as well as educators, should understand, review, and help improve assessment systems.*

■ **Standardized tests** are given to large numbers of students under similar conditions. They are usually multiple choice, but some have short answer and may even include longer responses and essays. Most require a "correct" answer and are frequently scored by computer. Most do not help identify how deep a student's understanding is or whether s/he can use knowledge in real-world situations.

■ **Alternative or performance assessments.** Methods, other than multiple-choice or short-answer standardized tests, for getting information about what students are learning and where they may need help. Alternative assessments include observations, essays, interviews, audio and video tapes, experiments, lab work, public exhibits and performances, teacher-designed quizzes and tests, portfolios (collections of work), and group projects.

Much research suggests that these assessments provide richer, more detailed information about students than any test. They also require reasonable class size, teacher training, and extra staff time which, of course, cost money, and suggest why they have not been as popular as standardized tests.

■ **Performance exams.** Tests which ask students to demonstrate particular knowledge or skills, for example: a math question asking students to explain in words why and how they did what they did or a reading test asking students to reflect at some length (depending on grade) on the meaning of a short essay and, perhaps, an accompanying graph, table, map, or other material.

The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) is the most extensive state performance exam. Vermont and Kentucky have also made progress toward high-quality performance tests. Among large, urban districts, Milwaukee has done the most with performance exams.

■ **Standards-based assessments or tests.** Many states and districts are in the process of replacing or supplementing standardized tests with tests tied to standards for what students in particular grades should know and be able to do. The new tests often combine multiple choice questions with others requiring short or even fairly long responses.

* These concepts are drawn from *Principles and Indicators for Student Assessment* by the National Forum on Assessment (36 pp, 1995). Available for $10 from FairTest; see page 10.

Problems with Tests

"[T]ests...are not in themselves tools for improving teaching and learning," cautions Susan Naimark, an NCEA steering committee member, parent activist, and Boston school committee member. "There is no doubt in my mind that it's time for higher standards in our public schools..., but are standardized tests the magic bullet — the solution?"

The answer to that question, say many activists and researchers, is "No." Here are some of the reasons why:

PHOTO: RICK REINHARD

- **Higher scores don't necessarily mean better schools.** More and more often, "low performing" schools are identified solely by scores. And, at the other end, schools are receiving state and district "seals of approval" simply because scores have gone up. In a study of six urban school districts, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform found that, "Schools that spend months on test preparation do not have time to implement high standards." (To order the report, see page 10.)

  Studies in Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and elsewhere have shown that school improvement is rooted in effective leadership, high expectations for all students, cohesive staff with a clearly articulated vision and knowledge of "best" practices, and strong ties to parents and communities. An over-emphasis on test scores tends to take attention away from these kinds of changes and place it on preparing students for a test.

- **Poor kids and children of color are likely, once again, to get the short end of the stick.** Research by FairTest, Cross City, and others shows that well-to-do, high-achieving schools are less likely than poor schools to let tests control curriculum and instruction. Rather, high-achieving schools tend to emphasize changes of the sort described above.

  And, while it's true that wealthier suburban schools tend to have higher test scores than rural and urban schools, research suggests that high scores are a bi-product of high expectations, strong overall preparation, and quality teaching, not test preparation. In addition, even in suburban districts, there is still an achievement gap between white students and those of color.

- **Individual students are slighted when tests are emphasized.** Jake Ibarra, a teacher at O'Farrell Middle School in San Diego which is dedicated to high achievement for all students, stresses the need for individual attention.

  "Our vision is that by setting high standards all kids can do well, but that means looking at individuals." In the six urban districts it studied, Cross City found that when the focus is on standardized tests there is "less emphasis on assessing the learning of individual students."

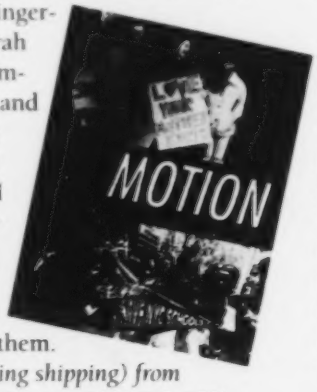
- **Scores and other data are not typically broken down in ways that facilitate meaningful decisions.** Cross City's report argues that solutions can be tailored to students' specific needs only if they are broken down by race, ethnicity, gender, disability, English language proficiency, and socio-economic level.

- **High-stakes testing is not effective in raising achievement.** FairTest research shows that states with high school graduation tests are less likely to show improvement in math than states without them. Scores may go up on the state exams, but not on independent exams. FairTest researchers think this is because the emphasis on testing pushes teachers into practices which focus on the narrow skills and knowledge measured by particular tests.

5
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

YOUTH-LED SOCIAL CHANGE

The CO/MOTION Guide to Youth-Led Social Change, (242 pp) by Leigh Dingerson and Sarah Hay, is a comprehensive and easy-to-use manual for high school and college age youth and older folks who work with them.



$35 (including shipping) from Alliance for Justice, 2000 P St NW, #712, Washington, DC 20036, 202-822-6070, www.afj.org, comotion@afj.org.
CoMotion also conducts training.

CONGRATULATIONS AND THANKS TO CJ!!

NCEA has lost a steering committee member, but Ohio has gained one helluva state senator. CJ has served on the steering committee since 1996, and her insights and enthusiasm will be missed. She's promised that we'll continue to hear from her and see her at conferences; let's hold her to it!

PARENTS' GUIDE TO SPECIAL ED LAW

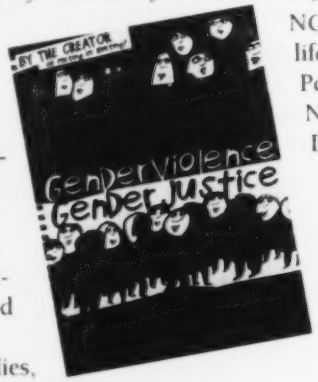
A New IDEA: A Parent's Guide to the Changes in Special Education Law for Children with Disabilities, (24 pp) by Tammy Seltzer, shows how parents can be involved in decisions about their children's schooling and how they can respond effectively to what happens at school. *For a single copy send $2 or a 9x12 envelope with 78 cents postage to: Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 1101 15th St NW, #1212, Washington, DC 20005-5002, 202-467-5730, TDD: 202-467-4232, hn1660@handsnet.org, www.bazelon.org. Spanish edition is sold out, but will be reprinted.*

ATTENTION NEW TEACHERS AND EDUCATION STUDENTS!

You need to know the **Organization of Young Education Activists**, and they need to know about you. OYEA is a network of young education and community activists supporting each other with resource and information exchanges. *For details: Kira Baker, kjbaker@dolphin.upenn.edu, www.sas.upenn.edu/~kjbaker/nop.html.*

RESOURCES FROM THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

NCEA member Nan Stein will conduct three programs for teachers and other school staff this June at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA: **Sexual Harassment**, 6/24; **Gender Violence**, 6/25; and **Confronting Teasing and Bullying in the Elementary Grades: A Curriculum Approach**, 6/22-25 (choose one). *Tuition for each day's session is $175 including lunch and all materials. Group discounts are available. For details or to register: Barkley Shafer, 781-283-2451, bshafer@wellesley. edu.*



Nan is also co-author of **Gender Violence/ Gender Justice: An Interdisciplinary Teaching Guide** (124 pp) includes discussion topics; reading, research, and writing assignments, case studies, and mock trials for grades 7-12. *$30 (including shipping and handling) from CRW Publications, Wellesslley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley, MA 02481, 781-283-2510, www.wellesley.edu/WCW.*

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM RETHINKING SCHOOLS

Classroom Crusades: Responding to the Religious Right's Agenda for Public Schools, (77 pp) edited by Barbara Miner, features an overview of the right's program plus articles on censorship, creationism, gay issues, sexuality education, and vouchers. *$8.50 including shipping and handling.*

New edition! of **Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years** (192 pp) edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson. This classic is now twice as long with new essays, poems, historical vignettes, and lesson plans for kindergarten through college. *$11.50 including shipping and handling.*

Rethinking Schools at 414-964-9646/ 800-669-4192, rsbusiness@aol.com, www.rethinkingschools.org, or 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212. Order both publications and save on shipping. Bulk rates also available.

IN CELEBRATION

Among recent contributions to NCEA was one in celebration of the life of Avis Porter, mother of Diana Porter, a founding member of NCEA. Our thoughts are with Diana and her family.

Asking Questions, Sparking Discussion

For many activists, learning about tests begins at home. Talk with your kids, they suggest. Find out about what tests they're being given and about what's going on in school generally. Then, listen to how school officials describe student achievement and school quality.

If it seems as though too much emphasis is being placed on test preparation and test scores, organize a coffee klatch, a focus group, or a phone survey to compare notes. Small group discussions can help you work up to a school- or even district-wide discussion involving teachers, parents, students, school councils, administrators, PTAs, and others.

Activists also stressed the value of writing letters and op ed pieces. For instance, Portland, OR, teacher Bill Bigelow's letter to the editor resulted in an avalanche of other letters and the start of a city- and then state-wide debate about tests.

Whether you're talking in small groups with other parents and teachers, holding larger meetings, or writing letters, don't underestimate the value of creating discussion and controversy about these issues.

Activists are asking many questions about achievement, learning, and the use of tests. The following are adapted mainly from "What Do Tests Test?" by Howard Gardner (*The New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1998) and "Making the Grade: What every parent needs to know about changes in assessments and testing," National PTA (*Our Children*, May/June 1997).

1 What tests are being used? What are they supposed to measure? Do tests focus on things most members of the school community believe are important? (Makers of standardized tests should provide schools with evidence of their soundness and a description of the appropriate use of results; parents and others are entitled to this information and should request it from the test company if the district won't make it available.)

PHOTO: RICK REINHARD

2 What other methods are used to evaluate students and schools? Teachers should be using — and describing to parents/guardians — other evaluation tools. District officials should talk about yardsticks other than test scores. For instance: performance assessments, graduation rates, student and teacher attendance, levels of parent and community involvement, percentages of teachers working in their area of certification, suspension and expulsion rates, course offerings, percentage of students preparing for college, and levels of teacher education.

3 Are test scores and the results of other evaluations provided to parents/guardians with clear explanations of what they mean, how they'll be used, and how they relate to classroom work and grades? Who else will have access to the scores?

School officials should provide well-organized, user-friendly information about assessment results. If the information is fuzzy, ask them to hold a meeting or workshop to clarify and discuss the data in more detail.

4 How will the school help children and schools with low scores? The community as a whole should know what the district plans to do to help particular groups of children or entire schools that do not score well. Parents and guardians should be involved in plans to help individual students who do not score well.

5 Do tests allow students to demonstrate a particular skill, for instance, by writing an essay? Or, do they test skills indirectly by, for example, asking students to identify the best-written of four sample passages?

Ask about the kinds of questions on the test, multiple choice and essay, for instance, and ask for samples of each. Find out what percentage of each type of question is included in the test and their relative weight in the scoring.

6 Do teachers have the resources and preparation to help students develop the skills to be tested? Are students learning real skills or are they "learning" the test? Teachers should have the training and the time to use a variety of teaching and assessment methods depending on students' needs.

Thanks!

NCEA's work is made possible by the generous contributions of our members and friends as well as the Funding Exchange, George Gund Foundation, New World Foundation, Open Society Institute, and Christopher Reynolds Foundation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Taking Action

Starting a discussion is an important first step. The next step is to mobilize parents, community activists, teachers, and their organizations to agree on changes you think might help and then work to win them. Here are a few of the goals activists told us they are working toward in their districts:

- **Clear statements of learning goals — standards — for each grade.** Everyone in the school community — parents/guardians, teachers and administrators, students — should play a role in agreeing on these goals. Without such goals, there is no basis for deciding what kind of assessment makes sense.

  Milwaukee has such goals, called benchmarks, for communication, math, science, community membership, and the arts. Among the sixth grade communication benchmarks are, "write a persuasive multi-paragraph paper," "use multiple sources," "cite sources for material used," and "recognize the credibility and bias of sources."

- **Limits on the use of test scores.** Some activists are working to make sure that test scores are not used as decisive factors in student assignments, placements, or promotions, or for intervening in entire schools.

  In Texas, the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) has filed a lawsuit challenging the state's use of test scores as the sole hurdle, other than passing classes, for high school graduation. In Boston, activists opposed a plan to use test scores as the basis for assigning students to remedial courses, advanced courses, and the city's restricted-entry schools.

- **Development and acceptance of alternative assessments.** Many school districts that had been moving toward portfolios, public exhibitions, and other alternatives or supplements to tests, are quietly dropping them in the face of state-mandated tests. It will take organized pressure to stop this trend.

  For instance, activists in Cambridge, MA, are working to convince the school committee to reject a recommended state reading test for second graders in favor of the "Early Literacy Assessment" (ELA), a one-on-one demonstration of what a student knows and can do. The ELA was developed over a dozen years by Cambridge school staff and experts at nearby Lesley College.

- **Withdrawal of inappropriate tests.** In Oregon (see page 7) and elsewhere teachers, parents, and other concerned activists are working to convince state education and political leaders that tests are not the way to go.

- **Release from state-mandated tests.** In New York, and elsewhere, school districts may apply for waivers from state tests if they can show they have another assessment system. Milwaukee's alternative, which involves a combination of tests and real-world demonstrations of mastery, won approval from Wisconsin officials.

  Many schools associated with New York City's Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) have been using alternative assessments for years, and are applying to keep their waivers in the face of new tests. CCE director Heather Lewis stresses that it's very important for schools requesting waivers to have rigorous systems. "If they're not real yet, then maybe we should give the [test]," she adds.

- **Test boycotts.** In Michigan, Ontario and elsewhere parents, students, and/or teachers have organized boycotts of state-mandated tests. NCEA member Rich Gibson reports that in at least one Michigan district up to 90% of students are expected to boycott the test.

  One measure of how seriously state officials take the boycott is that Michigan's governor has offered tuition credits, Gibson calls them bribes, of $500 to middle school students and $2,500 to high school students who pass the Michigan test. Since only two percent of Detroit's students are expected to pass the test, the credits are being described as a tax break for the well-educated since they're the ones whose children are expected to do best on the tests.

PHOTO: RICK REINHARD

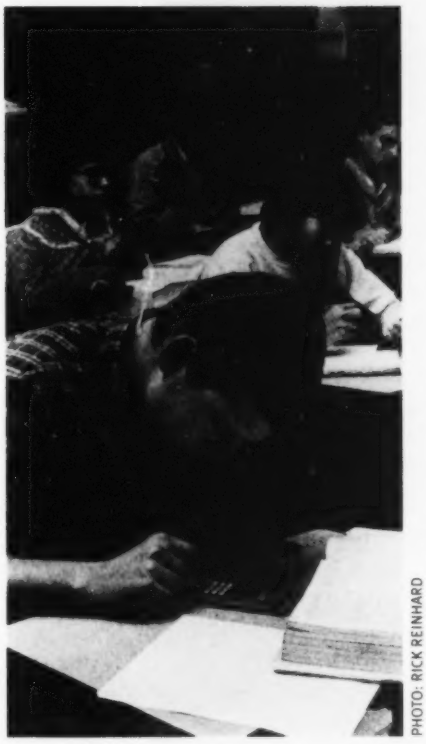


PHOTO: RICK REINHARD

Chicago teachers sued for publishing test

The January/February issue of *Substance*, a monthly paper written by Chicago teachers, published the entire text of the "pilot" Chicago Academic Standards Examination. Editor George Schmidt wrote that they were publishing the test to force a public debate about the tests.

The school system sued *Substance*, Schmidt, and his wife and co-editor. District officials also got a court order requiring confiscation of all copies of the paper. While the confiscation order was eventually withdrawn, some Chicago newspapers have called for teachers involved in *Substance* to be fired.

A few states already release test items, and in some cases errors have been identified as a result. In Massachusetts, for instance, reading passages in fourth-grade tests were discovered to be mostly fifth- and sixth-grade level.

"Meanwhile, When Do I Sleep?"

BY BILL BIGELOW

We began a recent Portland Area Rethinking Schools get-together by asking people to write stories about how Oregon's new "high-stakes" standards and assessments are affecting classroom life. What flowed out of people's pens and pencils was a poignant and infuriating look at the consequences of top-down "reform."

Fifth grade teacher Eric Olson described life under the new statewide writing assessments that must be scored on a one through six scale: "A child who was pleased that she had written her report on the Vanport Flood, some of the best writing she has ever done, burst into tears when I suggested that her sentences were about a two in fluency."

Lorraine Weyrauch, who teaches in a successful high school alternative program, described the reform's impact on her students, "...many of our kids are giving up. They look at the new bar they have to hurdle as so far out of their reach there is no point in trying. The test scores tend to reinforce their beliefs that they can't or that there is something wrong with them personally. They don't question the system, but internalize its negative judgment of them.

"With [the new tests] it doesn't matter that a formerly hostile, angry kid now can smile and laugh with us or that another politely asks for help in math instead of throwing something. These things are not testable so they don't matter."

That's the bad news. The good news is that teachers have been organizing to critique and challenge the state's testing mania. Social studies teachers have distributed a petition statewide calling for a suspension of multiple choice tests scheduled for the spring.

A series of spirited *Oregonian* newspaper articles and letters have criticized the "social studies tests from hell," stimulating statewide discussion of the entire reform initiative.

Three teachers from Irvington Elementary initiated weekly staff gatherings to discuss how new standards and assessments are changing classroom life. They decided to hold a conversation with parents at the school. Eight teachers met with fifty parents at a PTA/school advisory committee meeting.

A Rethinking Schools committee to monitor implementation of the state reform is reviewing the stories participants wrote at our last meeting, and working on outreach ideas including articles in the state teachers' union magazine, teacher/parent forums and "truth squads" to hold conversations with community groups.

Here in Oregon, whenever I hear the expression, "higher standards," I translate it to: more testing. In the best of times teaching is enormously tiring. These days, many of us feel like we have two jobs: teaching and challenging the so-called reform.

As Rethinking Schools member Sandra Childs wrote, "Because I am still a good teacher, now a good fighter, and a good mother, I am exhausted. If I don't engage in this challenge my students and our schools will suffer. Meanwhile, when do I sleep?"

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES, APRIL 16 AND 17, PORTLAND, OR

Portland Rethinking Schools, with support from NCEA and local groups, is organizing media events with FairTest director Monty Neill and a strategic planning session on Friday the 16th. On Saturday the 17th, Neill will give a public talk; a series of workshops will follow. *Details: Bill Bigelow, bbpdx@aol.com or 503-282-6848.*

Liz Aaronsohn

teacher educator, New Britain, CT

I've been watching formerly creative, wonderful elementary teachers cave into the mania of preparation for the Connecticut Mastery Tests. No science or social studies get taught because they're not tested. Teachers are giving up learning centers, publishing, spontaneity, even giving up really tuning in to their students, because they're driven by tests.

And not just the tests — the scores! The scores get published in newspapers and although it's predictable that the towns with the highest incomes will have the highest scores and the lowest incomes the lowest scores, they get printed as if there's some meaning there.

Inner-city principals, in particular, are worried that they'll be reprimanded or the school closed down if the scores are too low. Teachers are in a panic: they're grim, driven. Kids are feeling the tension. No more community-building goes on in classrooms I visit. It's a tragedy. That's apart from the whole question of what gets tested, in what language, why, and who decides!

Bakari Chavanu

teacher, Sacramento, CA

Testing is undermining efforts for real school change. We need to discuss what impact testing has on learning and how it undermines the role of teachers in identifying what is important to student learning. District- and state-mandated tests are extremely misleading about the skills and abilities of students, and end up undermining real student work and knowledge.

Virginia Raymond

parent activist, Austin, TX

I downplay the tests, but I don't — can't — completely ignore them. It's a balance — when my children show me any work, I tell them I'm proud of them. I comment more enthusiastically and try to engage them on drawing, papers, etc., not report cards and tests.

When my daughter has been upset about a test, we talk about why "every pencil has an eraser" — mistakes are expected. When they're worried, I say, "Just do your best." I have had fits of exasperation a few times with teachers who spend overly much time on preparing for standardized tests.

Linda Logan

parent activist, Chicago, IL

Tests should not be high stakes for students, but rather for the paid educators whose job and responsibility it is to teach/facilitate student success on these tests. Educators are the only ones who supposedly know what children are expected to learn in school. Educators have also accepted the responsibility of ensuring that children learn by joining the field of "educators," yet there is no accountability for educators' failure — only the students are at risk.

There is an injustice being committed when we hold students responsible for the inability of educators to do what they are hired to do — teach our children. At the same time, adults need to be held accountable as well — these high stakes tests do not seem to test our accountability to our children. In Chicago we have children who are being held back in third grade for not passing a test. How on earth is it that the child is punished by this and the educators and society responsible continue to receive paychecks?

Heather Lewis

parent and director, Center for Collaborative Education, New York, NY

Parents should insist that test results are used fairly and they should ask over and over, "How else are you evaluating my kid?" But in the long run, we need an assessment system that's more than a one-shot test. It should show each student's growth over time, allow for feedback from the student, and involve parents. It should be aligned with standards that reflect what we want kids to learn.

Michelle Pillen

parent activist, Bloomington, IL

I tell my third grader that it's important to do her best on the test, but not to become too hyped up about it because tests only measure what you think and feel at that particular point in time. Standardized tests don't tell you how smart you are, only how well you took the test.

What I'm not telling her is how frustrated I feel about getting minimal information from her teachers and the district about what this test will be used for. I bet that administrators and the teaching staff talk about testing, but that information is not shared in an ongoing meaningful way with parents and students.

The average parent does not receive enough information about the role of tests in our schools, especially when it relates to how it directly affects our children.

Steven Friedman

teacher, San Rafael, CA

I feel all teachers should discuss the issues of testing with their students and challenge district and board policies. We should ask ourselves what we accomplish as a society by using standardized tests that are inherently biased, racist, classist and don't measure so many important aspects of intelligence, creativity, personal and social responsibility, or integrity.

Christine Sleeter

teacher educator, Monterey, CA

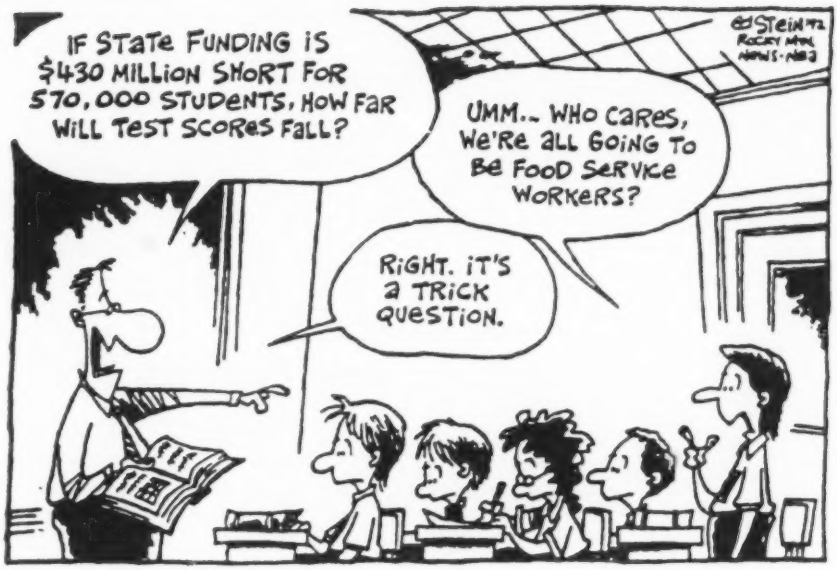
To me, the biggest issue here is that the state is using testing as a way to control what gets taught and, in the process, diminishing debate about difficult and complex issues. The complex issues involve funding for education at both the K-12 and higher education levels, the complexity of literacy acquisition, the complexity of literacy and bi-literacy development in linguistically diverse schools, and I suspect paradigm debates about what counts as fair and excellent schooling in a multicultural society.

Kent Spring

teacher and parent, Portland, OR

Tests have contradictory effects on the curriculum. They emphasize some mathematical concepts we should be teaching — statistics, for example — but they also require us to teach more directly toward the test and not stray off into areas that might be more interesting.

Here there is NO connection between the tests and any real work on equity. The discussions about school change and excellence have really been from the top, down. Students are getting numb to the whole process. It is just obvious that very little of this is to make schools, or even students, better.


IF STATE FUNDING IS $430 MILLION SHORT FOR 570,000 STUDENTS, HOW FAR WILL TEST SCORES FALL?
UMM.. WHO CARES, WE'RE ALL GOING TO BE FOOD SERVICE WORKERS?
RIGHT. IT'S A TRICK QUESTION.

Rick Hesch

education researcher, University of Manitoba, Winnepeg, MT, Canada

Standardized tests should be resisted and critiqued explicitly from the outset. While community-based groups' concerns and interests have validity and must be acknowledged and responded to seriously, standardized testing is not appropriate under any circumstances. These tests violate basic principles of cross-cultural education...[and] are principally designed as controls on teachers. While few social justice educators would be so naive as to say we do not need to hold teachers accountable to communities, other means need to be found to do this.

Diana Autin

parent and director, State Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN), Newark, NJ

We talk with parents a lot about standards-based reform, assessment, and related issues. Unfortunately, when parents talk to school people, they often find that: (a) teachers don't know much about it; (b) parents' views are considered unimportant by professionals; and (c) there is very little reflective practice and decision making going on.

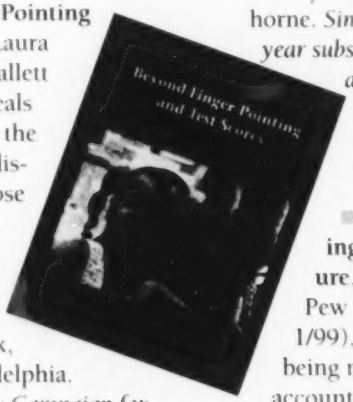
MAKING INFORMED CHOICES ABOUT ASSESSMENT

A number of surveys have proclaimed widespread parent and community support for standardized tests. However, research conducted by Lorrie Shephard and The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing found that when parents are actually shown more complex assessments they prefer them over multiple choice questions because they "make children think."

ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

General

For those with access to the world wide web, the **Assessment Reform Network**, organized by FairTest (see box), is an ongoing conversation on how activists are responding to the national trend toward high-stakes testing. To subscribe send this e-mail message to listserv@lists.cua.edu: "Sub ARN-L" followed by your first and last names. You will receive a confirmation note.



■ **Beyond Finger-Pointing and Test Scores**, Laura Allen and Anne Hallett (189 pp, 1999), deals with test scores in the context of urban districts' efforts to close achievement gaps. Includes case studies of Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, and Philadelphia. *Contact: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 407 S. Dearborn St., #1500, Chicago, IL 60605, 312-322-4880. (New publication; price not available at press time.)*

■ The mission of **The Center for Language in Learning** is to offer school districts and the concerned public a fair and accurate evaluation system which integrates classroom assessment with teaching and learning. *CLL, 10610 Quail Canyon Rd., El Cajon, CA 92021, 619-443-6320, lrecord@cll.org, www.learningrecord.org/lrorg.*

■ **Newsletter of the Center for Collaborative Education** (CCE), New York, NY. Spring issue will feature assessment issues. *Free. Phone 212-348-7821 for details.*

■ **The US Department of Education's ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment & Evaluation**, *1129 Shriver Lab, College of Library & Information Services, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, 800-464-3742, 301-405-7449, feedback@ericae.net, http://ericae.net/.*

■ **Philadelphia Public School Notebook**. The Spring 1999 issue includes local test scores and analyses plus opinion pieces by FairTest director Money Neill and teacher Ron Whitehorne. *Single issue free on request, one-year subscription $12 ($7 for parents and students) from PSN, 3721 Midvale Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19129, 215-951-0330, x 107.*

■ **Quality Counts: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure**, *Education Week* with The Pew Charitable Trusts (206 pp, 1/99), is an overview of progress being made to hold schools accountable; includes a state-by-state review. *$10 (including postage and handling) from: Ed Week, 6935 Arlington Rd., #100, Bethesda, MD 20814-5233, http://www.edweek.org/reports/qc99.*

■ ***Rethinking Schools*, Spring 1999 issue** on testing, standards, and retention. Articles by teachers Bill Bigelow, Daniel Ferri, Kate Lyman, and Tom McKenna, plus Julie Woestehoff, director, Parents United for Responsible Education. *Single copies, $7; one-year subscription, $12.50. 800-669-4192/414-964-9646, www.rethinkingschools.org, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212.*

■ **Teaching for Change: Multicultural Education Resources** *(free copy available from NCEA)* includes a range of publications on testing, tracking, and related issues, including some FairTest materials. Of particular interest:

First Grade Takes a Test, Miriam Cohen (31 pp, 1980, Bantam Doubleday, NY, NY), this illustrated children's book offers a delightfully concrete and accessible critique of tests. Great discussion starter for children, parents, and teachers. *$5 plus shipping and handling from NECA, PO Box 73038, Washington, DC 20056, 202-238-2379, necadc@aol.com, www.teachingforchange.org.*

And don't forget...***Action for Better Schools*, Vol. 5/#4, "Where Does 'Getting Tough' Get Us: A Look at the DC Public Schools,"** includes a short section on how testing fits in to a "get tough" approach to education. **Vol. 4/#3, "Getting a Handle on Student Assessment,"** summarizes the National Forum on Assessment's Principles and Indicators for Student Assessment Systems — an excellent guide for parents and teachers

FairTest

FairTest: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing is a key source for materials and advice on testing. A subscription to ***The Examiner*,** its quarterly newsletter, **is *$30 per year. (Free sample available from NCEA.)***

FairTest also publishes and distributes a range of books and pamphlets for professional educators and lay readers. Some samples: **Annotated Bibliographies** *(free on website or order for $3-8)*, **Implementing Performance Assessments: A Guide to Classroom, School, and System Reform** (56 pp, 1995, $6) **Standardized Tests and Our Children** (also available in Spanish; 32 pp, 1991, $4). *Bulk rates available.*

FairTest, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139-1802, 617-864-4810, fairtest@aol.com, www.fairtest.org.

who want to influence assessment decisions. Also features essays on portfolio assessment by parent activist Felicita Morales and teacher Marc Osten. *Single copies free to NCEA members; $1 each for non-members. Call for bulk rates. NCEA: rfbs@aol.com, 914-876-4580.*

Teaching methods and alternatives to tests

■ **Assessing Literacy With the Learning Record: A Handbook for Teachers**, Mary Barr & the Center for Language in Learning (1999), integrates classroom evaluation, professional development, research on teaching and learning, and large-scale assessment of students. *Available in two volumes, grades 6-12 and K-6.*

■ **Children at the Center: A Workshop Approach to Standardized Test Preparation,** K. Taylor and S. Walton (1998) and **A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests**, L. Calkins, K. Montgomery, and D. Santman (1998) both discuss how to maintain a child-centered classroom while still preparing students for standardized tests.

All of the above may be ordered from your local bookstore or directly from Heinemann, 361 Hanover St., Portsmouth, NH 03801, www.heinemann.com.

■ **National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching** has many publications on language records, observations, portfolios, work samples, and other alternatives and supplements to testing. *www.tc.columbia.edu/~ncrest or Box 110, 411 Main Hall, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027-6696.*

NCREST publications include: **An Authentic Journey**, Lynne Einbender and Diane Wood; **An Inquiry High School: Learner-Centered Accountability at the Urban Academy**, Jacqueline Ancess; **Authentic Assessment in Action**, Linda Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Beverly Falk; and **Outside/Inside, Inside/Outside: Developing and Implementing the School Quality Review**, Ancess.

SIGN ME UP!

NCEA is a membership organization and depends on your participation and support!

☐ **YES,** I want to help build a movement for public schools that serve all children well. Enclosed is my dues check:

☐ $40 (household income over $40,000) ☐ $5 (household income under $15,000)
☐ $20 (household income $25–$40,000) ☐ $100 (organizations)
☐ $15 (household income $15–25,000)

Included with your membership are free samples of the following publications. Please check the ones you'd like to receive.

☐ FairTest Examiner
☐ Philadelphia Public School Notebook
☐ Rethinking Schools
☐ Teaching for Change: A Catalog of Anti-Racist, Multicultural Curriculum, NECA
☐ Leccion Aprendidas: Apoyando la Diversidad en las Escuelas a Traves de la Participacion de la Familiar la Comunidad (circle your choice of Hmong, or Spanish), The Saint Paul Foundation

☐ **Enclosed is an additional contribution of: $** _____

Contributors of $40 or more *(not including dues)* may select one of the following publications.

☐ *Funding for Justice: Money, Equity and the Future of Public Education,* a Rethinking Schools publication, 80 pp
☐ *Resistance in Paradise: Rethinking 100 Years of U.S. Involvement in the Caribbean and the Pacific,* American Friends Service Committee and Office of Curriculum Support, Philadelphia Public Schools, 199 pp
☐ *Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment with New English Learners at International High School,* Jacqueline Ancess and Linda Darling Hammond, 81 pp, 1994, National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching, New York, NY

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State ____ Zip _____

Phone (H) _____ (W) _____

E-mail _____ Fax _____

☐ **Check here** if you do not want to be contacted by other members.
☐ **Check here** if you do not want to be included in any membership directory.

Return to: **NCEA, P.O. Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572**

Action for Better Schools is published quarterly by the National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA), P.O. Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572. Members in good standing may copy material if credit is given and copies forwarded to NCEA. Others should make reprint requests in writing.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Hold these dates!

NCEA's next conference will be held **July 13–16, 2000**, at the UCLA conference center in Los Angeles. The conference is being organized around collaboration and community building. A call for workshop proposals will be available this summer.

NCEA training opportunities

Two new workshops are now available through NCEA's Parent and Community Outreach program. Both sessions will explore issues of race, language, literacy, class, gender, socialization, economics, and power in public schools.

Train-the-trainer sessions are for experienced parent and community activists who want to share what they know by learning to lead workshops for others. Topics will include facilitation skills, planning a workshop; the role of the trainer as activist, facilitator, and educator, and more.

Alliance building is for educators interested in dialogue and collaboration with students' families. Sessions will address ways to build trust despite differences in race, class, language, etc. Both personal and institutional challenges to cross-constituency work will be explored.

NCEA members interested in participating in one of these sessions — or co-hosting one in your city — may contact *Luz Guerra, NCEA Parent and Community Outreach coordinator, 201 W. Stassney Ln., #502, Austin, TX 78745, 512-916-4065, lguerra@mindspring.com.*

NCEA STEERING COMMITTEE

NAME	RESPONSIBILITIES	PHONE	E-MAIL
Bakari Chavanu	Program Committee Co-chair	916-689-0908/h	bchavanu@csus.edu
Donna Gold	Treasurer & Program Committee Co-chair	202-822-7327/w 703-684-6006/h	dgold@nea.org
Arlene Gale Inouye	*NCEA Co-chair*; Conference Committee Co-chair	626-799-9157/h	ainouye@juno.com
Gloria Inzunza-Franco	Treasurer; Conference Committee Co-chair	562-985-5417/w	gifranco@csulb.edu
Harold Jordan	Personnel Committee	215-241-7176/w	hjordan@afsc.org
Stan Karp	*NCEA Co-chair*	973-783-5381/h	stankarp@aol.com
Linda Mizell	Program Committee	617-661-7789/h	lindamiz@aol.com
Susan Naimark	Development Committee Chair	617-623-9900/w	snaimark@youthbuild.org
Diana Porter	Personnel Committee	513-559-3055/w	porterd@CPSboe.k12.oh.us

NCEA STAFF

Debi Duke	Director	914-876-4580/w	ncea@aol.com
Luz Guerra	Parent and Community Outreach	512-916-4065/w	lguerra@mindspring.com
Paul Socolar	Member Services and Development	215-848-4281/w	nceapaul@aol.com

National Coalition of Education Activists
P.O. Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572-0679

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Kingston, NY
Permit No. 89